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"Give me a place to stand and I will move the Earth." – Archimedes

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Finding true love

Gay teens search for a place

by Mary Margaret Nussbaum

Brittany Weber is nobody's baby, but to hear her tell it, in high school she was quite the teen dream.

"I decided I wasn't going to be gay," says this twenty-something local advocate for gay rights. "So, I ignored it. I dated all the boys. I fully compensated, probably overcompensated in the heterosexuality department."

But Weber always knew this wasn't where her heart lay.

"I realized I was gay when I was 15 or 16 years old, but there was a realization of something different before that, ever since, like, camp in eighth grade. But, I didn't have a word for it."

After Weber left home and entered college she found that word.

I really came out [as a lesbian] freshman year. I met a woman and we had a relationship. I knew I was a lesbian and I became very cool with it."

Coming to terms with her own sexuality was the first step in a long journey.

"I wrote my parents an eight page letter my sophomore year and then didn't answer the phone for like three months. My family took it very poorly. Your parents have all these expectations—you're going to get married, have kids and be fabulous. It's not hate or anger, it's disappointment. It's taken years to mend our relationship."

Weber tells homosexual teens not to come out if there is a possibility that they will be kicked out of their house.

"Coming out is such a process. You have to be so ready to do it and so confident in yourself that you'll be able to rebuke any terrible things that you're going to hear. It's hard."

Gay teenagers are neither here nor there. They live in a sort of identity limbo—one foot firmly planted on the prom dance floor and the other stumbling on less trod paths. For the teenagers who go through this alone, the confusion can be overwhelming.

Many do not feel comfortable coming out to their families and the idea of confiding in their friends is terrifying.

Few high schools have bi/gay/lesbian clubs though they are found on most every college campus. Earlier this year, the Salt Lake City Board of Education banned all school clubs that are not class-related after a controversy surrounding gay clubs.

It is estimated (though widely debated) that one out of every ten people is homosexual. In 1991, the complaints of Senator Jesse Helms (R—N.C.) led the Department of Health and Human Services to cancel what was to be the largest ever study of sexual behavior and teenagers.

Ground Zero, a nonprofit local gay rights organization, sponsors Inside/Out a support and activity group for gay, lesbian and bisexual youth in the Pikes Peak Region. The group meets once a week.

"They come in like a bunch of banshees," says Weber. "They're amazing. They can come in here and be who they need to be and who they want to be. I think that's the worst thing about being gay in high school—you never meet anybody; you don't go through that lust and teenage love and having the first love of your life. When you're an adult you have to start that whole process over."

Many of the teenagers at Inside/Out have not told their family and friends that they are gay. With the other kids, one night a week, they find a safe place.

A study done by the Department of Health and Human Services showed that among 500 gay and lesbian San Francisco teens, 30 percent had attempted suicide at least once. Nationally, it is estimated that gay teens are three times more likely to take their life than are straight teens.

Julia Kenyon (not her real name), a Palmer student, is one of the lucky ones. She is out to her family, friends, and co-workers though most of her classmates don't know.

Her eyes are direct and her words soft-spoken.

"I've watched men [crap] all over my mother my entire life," Kenyon says.

"I realize that my girlfriend was born gay but with me it's like I could have gone either way. I've been in relationships with guys before and in some ways this is not that different. It's just that with women there's more emotional closeness. You know more about each other, so you know what they need."

Kenyon met her girlfriend of two years, who she describes with a smile as being wonderful, at a point when she was just beginning to come to terms with being a lesbian.

"As a teen you're trying to decide who you are; what kind of music to listen to, what to do on the weekends, what fashion you like. It's so much harder to figure out who you like too."

"When I came out it wasn't like I made an announcement. I told one person and they told five and they each told ten. The people who didn't like it stayed away and the people who didn't care just told me how much they loved me."

Though Kenyon says she surrounds herself with a support system, it's her confidence and poise that get her through the times when she's walking down the street with her girlfriend, holding hands and a man yells "You're the reason I can't get a date!"

"I have this little pink triangle on a binder," Kenyon says. "This guy [in class] said 'Hey maybe you and your girlfriend could come over and we could...'" her voice trails off. "That's pretty common," she says.

photo illustration by Katie Pruitt / the Lever

Many gay teens struggle with the challenge of whether or not to tell their families and friends.

"I know society says 'faggot' and 'gays' and bla bla bla. But pretty much if you don't accept me, you don't need to be around me."

She plans to catch an Ani DiFranco concert this week and move in with her girlfriend come January. After earning some more money she'll be off to college where she hopes to become a child psychologist.

It's a Saturday night at the Penthouse, a local gay dance club and bar. At 2 the doors open for all ages. The kids begin to file in. Two guys around 17 years old come in holding hands. They let go only long enough to dig their ID's and three bucks out of their pockets. Inside the small dance floor is clouded from the fog machine. Some couples are slow dancing, their steps together, but falling out of time with the house music which the deejay spins. A blond haired boy swirls about, his loafers sliding as he lip synes "Oh hell yeah/only love can set you free/set you free" The two hours fly by, the last song is played and the dancers, now a little sweaty and very sleepy, gather their coats and their friends.

"You guys take care," the deejay bids them good-bye, "we're here for you, okay?"

National Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual Youth Hotline— 800-347-8336
INSIDE/OUT Youth Group— 578-3160, 578-3162

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COLORADO STUDENT FREE EXPRESSION LAW

(Cite as: Colo. Rev. Stat. § 22-1-120)

Section 22-1-120 — Rights of free expression for public school students.

(1) The general assembly declares that students of the public schools shall have the right to exercise freedom of speech and of the press, and no expression contained in a student publication, whether or not such publication is school-sponsored, shall be subject to prior restraint except for the types of expression described in subsection (3) of this section. This section shall not prevent the advisor from encouraging expression which is consistent with high standards of English and journalism.

(2) If a publication written substantially by students is made generally available throughout a public school, it shall be a public forum for students of such school.

(3) Nothing in this section shall be interpreted to authorize the publication or distribution by students of the following:

(a) Expression which is obscene;

(b) Expression which is libelous, slanderous, or defamatory under state law;

(c) Expression which is false as to any person who is not a public figure or involved in a matter of public concern; or

(d) Expression which creates a clear and present danger of the commission of unlawful acts, the violation of lawful school regulations, or the material and substantial disruption of the orderly operation of the school or which violates the rights of others to privacy.

(4) The board of education of each school district shall adopt a written publications code, which shall be consistent with the terms of this section 22-1-120, C.R.S., and shall include reasonable provisions for the time, place, and manner of conducting free expression within the school district's jurisdiction. Said publications code shall be distributed, posted, or otherwise made available to all students and teachers at the beginning of the 1991-92 school year and at the beginning of each school year thereafter.

(5) (a) Student editors of school sponsored student publications shall be responsible for determining the news, opinion, and advertising content of their publications subject to the limitations of this section. It shall be the responsibility of the publications advisor of school-sponsored student publications within each school to supervise the production of such publications and to teach and encourage free and responsible expression and professional standards for English and journalism.

(b) For the purposes of this section, "publications advisor" means a person whose duties include the supervision of school sponsored student publications.

(6) If participation in a school-sponsored publication is part of a school class or activity for which grades or school credits are given, the provisions of this section shall not be interpreted to interfere with the authority of the publications advisor for such school-sponsored publications to establish or limit writing assignments for the students working with the publication and to otherwise direct and control the learning experience that the publication is intended to provide.

(7) No expression made by students in the exercise of freedom of speech or freedom of the press shall be deemed to be an expression of school policy, and no school district or employee, or parent, or legal guardian, or official of such school district shall be held liable in any civil or criminal action for any expression made or published by students.

(8) Nothing in this section shall be construed to limit the promulgation or enforcement of unlawful schoolregulations designed to control gangs. For this purpose of this section, the definition of "gang" shall be the definition found in section 19-2-111(2)(d)(II), C.R.S.